



Leadership-in-Action Project Report

ECOGENIA OLYMPUS PROGRAM

LITochoro, Greece

Scholar: Lilah Williamson

Supervisor: Erika Spagakou

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Introduction

This report reflects on my six-week Leadership-in-Action (LiA) experience with Ecogenia, a youth-led nonprofit based in Greece that runs the Olympus Program—an initiative focused on climate resilience, civic service, and trail restoration on Mount Olympus. As a Canadian scholar unfamiliar with Greek language and culture, I immersed myself in a new environment to engage in environmental stewardship, develop leadership skills, and design a proposal for a future diaspora cohort. My role blended fieldwork with strategic development, combining manual labour on trails with stakeholder research and proposal writing.

This report explores the challenges I faced, the leadership competencies I applied and developed—including cultural humility, teamwork, and adaptability—as well as ethical dilemmas encountered and key lessons from collaboration and team dynamics. My experience with Ecogenia significantly strengthened my cross-cultural awareness and deepened my commitment to inclusive, ethical leadership.



Challenges Faced

LANGUAGE BARRIER



The most significant challenge was the language barrier, as I do not speak Greek. While I made efforts to learn basic phrases via Duolingo and by asking my colleagues for translations, much of the program—particularly orientation sessions—was conducted in Greek. This led to feelings of exclusion during key workshops and team activities, limiting my ability to fully participate and connect. I addressed this by initiating translation requests, engaging English-speaking tourists during community engagement days, and actively listening for context cues to improve comprehension. Despite these hurdles, I used the time productively to begin drafting my diaspora cohort proposal.

PHYSICAL LABOUR



Although I enjoy hiking, I had never worked a manual labour job before. Trail work demanded that I adjust my sleep and nutrition habits, learn to operate unfamiliar tools, and build physical endurance. Through persistence, inquiry, and practice, I became more capable and confident in the field.

STAKEHOLDER INPUT



In developing the diaspora cohort proposal, I conducted several stakeholder interviews and encountered divergent perspectives—especially around program costs. Some felt participants could pay for travel and accommodation, while others advocated for funding support. Navigating these tensions required active listening and consultation with my supervisor. Ultimately, I proposed multiple funding models to reflect different possibilities and build consensus.

Leadership Skills Applied & Developed

CULTURAL HUMILITY



Cultural humility was essential to my leadership journey. Navigating the language barrier taught me to ask for help, defer to others' knowledge, and remain open to unfamiliar social norms. I also came to understand the deep mistrust many Greek youth have in their government—shaped by economic and political instability. This challenged my assumptions about civic engagement and made me more mindful of different lived realities. A key moment occurred during an environmental action planning activity. Although I found many ideas simplistic by my activist standards, I prioritized encouragement and respect over critique, recognizing that activism manifests differently across contexts.

TEAMWORK



Teamwork was critical both on the trails and while drafting the proposal. Trail crews required constant coordination to avoid redundancy and optimize tool use. In the proposal process, I collaborated closely with my supervisor and incorporated diverse feedback, learning to synthesize ideas into a cohesive and actionable plan.

ADAPTABILITY



The experience demanded flexibility—from shifting trail plans due to wildfire risk to working in intense heat under new government regulations. I also pivoted quickly when staff were unavailable, helping clean the local Alpine Club or municipal park instead. These moments taught me to remain calm, solution-oriented, and supportive under changing conditions.



Ethical Considerations

I encountered two primary ethical dilemmas. The first was deciding whether diaspora participants should self-fund their participation. While some stakeholders assumed they would be from privileged backgrounds, I advocated for accessibility and equity. The final proposal included both funding-dependent and participant-funded models.

The second ethical dilemma involved whether I should suggest myself as the future coordinator for the diaspora program. Although the idea was raised by others, I felt it would be inappropriate to include myself as a beneficiary within the proposal I was authoring. Instead, I suggested the role be filled by someone with a Canadian background, leaving the decision open-ended.

Collaboration & Team Dynamics

Initially, cultural and linguistic barriers made connection with the Greek cohort difficult. However, by expressing curiosity about their language and culture, I built strong friendships over time. My colleagues were welcoming and inclusive, offering a model of hospitality I hope to emulate back home.

I formed a strong relationship with my supervisor Erika, who provided mentorship through weekly check-ins and co-strategizing on proposal development. A day trip to Thessaloniki early in the program helped establish rapport and trust, which enriched our working relationship.

Lastly, I learned valuable lessons from information interviews—particularly from one that went poorly. In that instance, I failed to research the organization beforehand, which led to questions that were already publicly available. The experience reinforced the importance of preparation and professionalism in stakeholder engagement.



Conclusion

My Leadership-in-Action experience with Ecogenia was both challenging and transformative. I developed greater cultural humility, adaptability, and confidence in navigating cross-cultural collaboration and ethical complexity. These lessons have shaped my understanding of leadership as a dynamic and context-sensitive practice. Moving forward, I will carry with me the value of listening first, asking thoughtful questions, and leading with empathy. Whether working in local or international contexts, I now feel better prepared to build inclusive initiatives and contribute to ethical, community-centered change.





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